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Ruslan Kotsaba

## **“Only graves await us”. The conflict in Donbass has split Ukraine. What will happen to the country after the conflict is over?**

Ukrainian journalist Ruslan Kotsaba has been working as a war correspondent in Donbass since 2014 on both sides of the armed conflict. Being a pacifist by conviction, he called for the ending of hostilities as soon as possible. During the presidency of Petro Poroshenko, the authorities persecuted him for calls to boycott the mobilization into the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), accusing him of treason, and the nationalists repeatedly attacked the journalist. The persecution continued under the rule of Volodymyr Zelensky, and the Amnesty International entered Ruslan on its list of prisoners of conscience. In August 2022, fearing for his life, he left for the United States. Lenta.ru talked to Ruslan Kotsaba about the internal conflicts that are tearing Ukrainian society apart, what chances are there for the pacifism in Ukraine to exist at all, and how the post-war future of the country might look like.

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***Lenta.ru: In 2014, you were one of the few Ukrainian journalists who published your stories from both sides of the conflict. Why did you make such a decision?***

**Ruslan Kotsaba:** These are simply standards of journalism. When covering any conflict – whether it be a conflict of interest in business, politics or an armed conflict – you need to give two points of view, and, if necessary, to provide an outsider view, for example, of an expert. In my opinion, it is absolutely normal to cover the conflict from all points of view. What is not normal is when somebody feels bad about such practice.

I believe that if you are a real journalist, then you have no right to provide only one point of view. Otherwise it is not a journalism, but a propaganda. Besides that, people die on both sides of the conflict. This fact alone makes it necessary to try to hear everyone’s story.

***Why did other Ukrainian journalists rarely do this?***

This is not even a problem of individual journalists, but of journalism in general. Military journalism is often confused with propaganda. When you risk your life and want people to see the war as you see it with your own eyes, then this places a special responsibility on you. Not all journalists understand this responsibility, when every word of yours, every picture you take generates a great interest.

I was the first journalist to be accredited on the both sides of the front line. Tens of millions of people saw the war as I saw it. But somebody decided to show only one point of view. It was not a journalism, and not even subjective journalism like blogging. It was "medializing" as in "to lick" [Russian root "liz" is for to lick]. You licked one side and engaged in propaganda, transforming itself into the press service of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which downplayed its own problems and exaggerated the problems of the enemy.

I don't understand how we can do this in a civil conflict, when people with Ukrainian passports kill other people with Ukrainian passports simply because they see the country's development differently.

***In your opinion, why the conflict was not resolved in April-May 2014? At that time, it did not seem that the majority of Ukrainian society wanted war...***

At that time the barricades were set up in front of the regional administration buildings all over the country, including the cities of Lugansk, Donetsk, my hometown of Ivano-Frankivsk, and, of course, Kyiv. It was despite the fact that the Criminal Code of Ukraine clearly interprets the seizure of administrative buildings as a crime against the state.

The difference is that when it happened in Kyiv and Ivano-Frankivsk, it was a "revolution". And when the residents of Lugansk and Donetsk did the same thing a few months later, they turned out to be "terrorists" and "separas" [for separatists].

Information support was inadequate, and they could not show that they also wanted to live in Ukraine, but with their opinions to be considered. And you know, if the building of the regional administration in Ivano-Frankivsk [west Ukraine] had been hit by an airstrike, as was the case in Luhansk [east Ukraine] in 2014, then my fellow countrymen would have been digging "kryivki" [Ukrainian for "hiding places"] and would have started a mass insurrection movement, as was the case in Western Ukraine after the Second World War.

It is called meanness and cynicism, when one is allowed to do something, while the other is not. When politicians began to divide Ukrainians into the "right" and "wrong" ones, then, unfortunately, the civil war became inevitable.

***Petro Poroshenko came to the presidency as a man who promised to stop the fighting. Why did his rhetoric and politics change so fast?***

Here we will have to make a short historical digression to show that such changes are not accidental, and that they are characteristic of Ukrainian politics.

All our presidents changed their course drastically either immediately after being elected or by the end of their term, spitting in the face of the voters.

Look at the first president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk. He was the second secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Ukrainian SSR and came to power on the slogans of maintaining ties with Russia, up to creating a confederation.

It was an absolutely false rhetoric, and the party elite simply wanted to plunder what was left in the Ukrainian SSR, calling it "independent Ukraine", without looking back for approval from Moscow.

The second president, Leonid Kuchma, during the election campaign positioned himself as the total opposite of the former head of state, speaking of the need to protect the rights of Russian-speaking residents of the Southeast and its industry. And what did he end up with? He wrote a book "Ukraine is not Russia", creating, in fact, the Ukrainian oligarchy. He, too, betrayed his constituents.

Not to mention the third president, Viktor Yushchenko, who was a very weak politician and not a president, but a result of a compromise between the oligarchs. The fourth president, Viktor Yanukovich, was elected on the same slogans. After the patriotic frenzy of the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, he again turned to the South-East, but after that he underwent an amazing metamorphosis.

Viktor Yanukovich eventually scammed everyone: both Russia and the oligarchs, who oriented on the Russian market. In words, everything was "forever with Russia", but in reality, an economic nationalism.

Petro Poroshenko, during his election campaign, also stated that he knew how to end the war "not in a few days, but in a few hours." He would place emphasis on the fact that he had personal contact with Russian President Vladimir Putin, with whom he communicated both as an oligarch and as a minister in the government of Nikolai Azarov. One should not forget that Petro Poroshenko is also one of the founders of the Party of Regions. In the elections he won in the first round, which means that people really had a mass psychosis. We all remember well what happened next...

### ***What does it all say about?***

Such politician behavior is a tragedy for Ukraine, which historically did not have its own statehood.

We, Ukrainians, deep down are all anarchists. And any power that is imposed on us is perceived as an occupational.

This ultimately brought us to the state that we are now annihilating not only our Russian brothers, but also each other. We are ready to fight each other because someone said a wrong word, in a wrong language, goes to the wrong church. We are eating ourselves.

### ***Do you think the same thing happened to Volodymyr Zelensky as did to his predecessors?***

Yes, exactly the same. In case your forgot, at the election time his slogans were about the willingness to negotiate "even with a bald devil", that "you just need to stop shooting" and "what difference does it make in who's name the street is named as long as it doesn't have bumps and pits."

But after that he changed his rhetoric by 180 degrees, became a "hawk of war" and also spat in the face of his voters who wanted peace.

All former presidents spat on their voters in the same way.

It seems to me that Volodymyr Zelensky, unfortunately, will be the last president of Ukraine: he is absolutely not self-sufficient, and he can crush political competition and remain popular as long as the hostilities are going on.

Vladimir Zelensky is a rather talented actor, and it is a big mistake to get surprised at some of his metamorphoses. He did not become president on his own volition. He was asked to play the role of the president, just as he played it in the Servant of the People TV series. Now he is playing the role of the supreme commander in chief.

Zelensky didn't change, he just wasn't himself from the beginning. And now he understands that, as an actor, he can't take it anymore, he understands that his life is going to end on the gallows, only it will be political gallows. He can only keep his popularity as long as the fighting is going on. Once it is finished, the "party of war" will lose.

***There were other political powers besides him, that advocated a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Does it mean that they also betrayed their voters?***

You know, there is a saying "the springtime will show who was sitting where". And now the war has showed who was genuine and who was not. Opposition Platform - For Life (OPZZh) was, in fact, the country's second party. In 2021 its ratings were no lower than that of the party in power.

But the OPZZh was not a monolith entity, and there were different groups within it. Yuriy Boyko had his own team, while Sergey Levochkin had another one. Some part of the party was grouped around Viktor Medvedchuk. And behind the scenes they constantly squabbled among each other. Boyko and Levochkin had betrayed their voters, and now they are playing along with Zelensky, providing him with the missing votes in parliament.

Medvedchuk is a different story. With the outbreak of hostilities, he ended up in a pre-trial detention center and after that he is saying very adequate things. It seems to me that he now realizes that he can become the number one opposition figure in the country.

Viktor Medvedchuk is now the only person who criticizes the authorities. It's just that he is now doing it from Moscow, and because of that it's not as effective as needs to be. But he definitely made an irrevocable decision for himself and said: "Here I come straight to you!"

At one time, after I spent time in a pre-trial detention center and figured out that the prison had not broken me, I realized that I was no longer afraid of anything, not even death. Even if I was left with only one finger on my hand, I would still use it to write down that I am against the war.

I believe that Viktor Medvedchuk is in the same situation. He can no longer pull back. And the rest of the so-called oppositionists are now in the hiding and will come out at the time when the negotiations will start again.

***Why didn't any of the deputies from the Opposition Platform for Life try to conduct peacekeeping activities from emigration?***

I made several attempts to meet with them and offered to create new media that would move the opposition agenda.

After all, today's Ukraine lives in the accelerated mode of the television marathon filled with zombie propaganda.

It turned out that they are all afraid of something. They do not understand that a politician is not one who is trying to fit in with the electorate, but one who leads the electorate. It turned out that cowards in the opposition parties are in the majority - they are waiting to be given a rostrum from which they will again wring their hands and show their great degree of compassion toward Ukraine.

As a former war correspondent, I can say that war brings out the real self in every person. It is an extreme situation in which you understand whether you are a human or a non-human. Can you suffer for the truth, do you really love people, or do you still hate them? War helps you to understand yourself.

Well, they also apparently figured out by themselves that they are not politicians at all, but cowards and political intriguers. They went into internal emigration, and we don't see them in politics anymore. But it doesn't mean that they will not come out again sometime later.

***Did Russian cultural influence and Russian media leave the Ukrainian cultural sphere with the disappearance of OPZZh from domestic politics and the closure of pro-Russian channels?***

You know, every action [force] has a reaction [force]. And there will definitely be a reaction to these actions of the authorities. It's just that people don't see a leader right now that they could follow, and everything is limited to a table talk.

It also should be noted that as a substitute for Russian culture instead of Ukrainian culture people are fed with an aggressive propaganda.

Russian culture will not disappear anywhere. The more you compress the spring, the stronger it expands. They have compressed the spring to the limit now, and sooner or later, it will be released and demolish this whole gang together with Vladimir Zelensky.

***Right now, there is a massive campaign in Ukraine to demolish monuments to Russian and Soviet cultural and political figures. Will it help to build a monolithic political nation?***

The problem with Ukraine is that they are trying to build a nation along ethnic lines. I consider those who are trying to build a nation along ethnic lines in the 21st century to be clinical morons.

Ethnical Jew Volodymyr Zelensky, together with ethnical Jew [Head of the President's Office] Andriy Yermak, are building the Ukrainian nation along ethnic lines. It looks silly, but this is the political technology that the "party of war" is now using.

I don't even want to comment on this. Well, how can one build statehood around ethnicity in the 21st century? Are you going to start measuring skulls with calipers and rulers? Their nationalism is not based on love for one's own, it's based on hatred for someone else's.

***There are many internal conflicts in the country indeed. Could the same problem with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) result in a real split in society?***

It is also part of the same strategy to retain power, to divide people by organizing a religious war.

Volodymyr Zelensky, who is an unbaptized person himself, is now planting a great villainy for the future of Ukraine. Religious conflicts can last for decades, and they are often very violent in nature.

It is true that most of the parishioners of the UOC are in favor of peace with Russia. But it should not be a reason to ban the most numerous confessions in the country. By their actions, the authorities violate the articles of the Constitution of Ukraine on religion and the separation of church and state.

At the same time, you know it's ironic that the majority of the parishioners of the UOC at one time voted for the new president, who posed himself as an opposite of Petro Poroshenko, including on the religious issue, when the latter actively promoted the ideas of an autocephalous church, of the so-called "tomosyatina". Volodymyr Zelensky, on the other hand, contended that we should not divide people according to faith and language, and thus received support of these people. And then he again spat in the face of his voters.

***How important is the language question for Ukrainians now? Over the past year, there appeared numerous news that in the western regions the refugees from the southeastern regions are being denied service in Russian language, despite the fact that their relatives are now fighting in the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Will the number of conflicts on language grounds only increase?***

This question is very important for the "party of war", because it can also be used to divide people in order to more easily control them. A sound politician, with a civil confrontation like this in the country, which has been going on since 2014 (and in fact even since 2009), would impose a taboo on the discussion of such topics. If, of course, he is a politician who really thinks in the interests of the state, and not a wirepuller of a politician who embroils people in arguments so that he can later fish in troubled waters.

Here Volodymyr Zelensky again follows in the steps of his predecessors: he, as the Russian-speaking president, together with the Russian-speaking office of the president, the Russian-speaking government and the predominantly Russian-speaking parliament, poses himself as a [Ukrainian] ultranationalist. It would be funny, but we don't feel like laughing because the country is dying.

This government can no longer work in a different way - it needs to divide people in order to deprive them of the opportunity to realize that they have only one enemy and the enemy is sitting in Kyiv on the Pechersk Hills.

It is simply irresponsible to keep bringing up the language question when a civil confrontation has been going on in the country for several years. Again, this is not politics, this is politicking. You have to have absolutely no compassion for your own people to act like this.

***All this is taking place against the backdrop of intensive military activities. How has Ukrainian society changed over the past year?***

Ukrainians are very divided. The military activities will sooner or later result either in a peace or a truce agreement, but the internal civil conflict will go on. And I hope it will not develop into civil strife, because there are oligarchs and politicians who would benefit from it.

I'll give you an example. I have a friend, a Russian-speaking Ukrainian. And this is absolutely normal, we are now communicating between you and me, you speak Russian, I speak Ukrainian - and we understand each other perfectly well. My friend is a good businessman, he faithfully pays taxes, and he is a patriot of his country. But he is afraid to speak Russian in his hometown, because he might get his jaw broken for doing that.

The authorities have let the genie of hatred out of the bottle with no prospect of getting it back. And sooner or later this genie will destroy those who released it.

***After the outbreak of hostilities, a great number of Ukrainians has left the country, but a large diaspora existed in Western countries even before that. Does the influence of the Ukrainian diaspora on Western governments contribute to the escalation of the conflict? Does the diaspora influence domestic political processes in Ukraine?***

There are war apologists in emigration indeed: they walk the streets here dressed in camouflage clothes, and they decorate cars with flags and coats of arms. But they are couch warriors that are mainly active on the Internet, where they can call for war to the last Ukrainian. I recently met such a guy on the streets, wearing a camouflage jacket with a trident chevron and a yellow tape on the sleeves (blue, yellow and green tape is used by the Ukrainian military as a tactical sign – note by "Lenta.ru"). I asked him: "Are you from a territorial defense of Brighton Beach? You are disgracing Ukraine and disgracing yourself." And he begins to make excuses that he is a volunteer and his sworn brothers allowed him to walk like that, because there is a war here.

In general, the farther from the front, the more aggressive rhetoric about the war to the last Ukrainian.

This aggressive rhetoric draws a lot of attention, but the majority of the emigration society simply lives without any worries, periodically donating small amounts to the aid funds of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. But at the same time, they know that they will never go back to Ukraine. This is also a vile and cynical position, but at least it is not declaratively aggressive. And people, in general, have nowhere to return. The post-war Ukraine will be no less terrible place to live than the war-time Ukraine.

***Is a pacifist position possible in the current conditions of large-scale hostilities in Ukraine? Is there a public demand for it?***

The pacifists will eventually become the majority. The longer the military activities destroy the economy, and the more people die, the more there will be pacifists. Now they say that pacifists play into the hands of the enemy, but this comes from a misunderstanding of the very essence of pacifism.

The Christian pacifist does not want to die and does not want to kill. We stand between the warring sides, and stones and sticks are raining down on us from both sides. For us, this is a natural course of things, and we are ready for this. But as time goes on there will be more and more pacifists.

Do you remember how the Vietnam War ended in 1975? There were a lot of pacifist slogans from the politicians, but they didn't mean much. And it is only when the Capitol was flooded with the columns, led by veterans, and not the hippies and rock musicians, then [U.S. President Richard] Nixon had no choice but to begin the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam.

Today the pacifists in Ukraine are not visible, because we are in the hiding. The authorities say that we are "the hand of the Kremlin" and "the agents of Russia." But the future belongs to peaceful people. Even if God allowed war as a punishment for the aggressiveness that permeates society, people with an aggressive stance can change their point of view during the war.

The future belongs to us, to the pacifists, to those who believe that good is capable of more than evil. And war is evil.

***What does the near future hold for Ukraine and Ukrainians?***

There will be a period of confusion. Ukraine will turn into a conglomerate of feudal principalities, each of which will have its own oligarch-king with a private army and his own serfs. After that, probably, these

principalities will again come to the conclusion that it is easier to survive together and will unite. There also might be a harsh dictatorship in the country.

I don't see any bright future [for Ukraine], because the hostilities have exacerbated all the problems that have accumulated in Ukrainian society. I don't believe that the European Union and the US will really help Ukraine recover after it fulfills its geopolitical role of weakening Russia. There are only graves in store for us in the future.

However, let's end on a positive note. It was Easter not long ago, the Resurrection of the Lord. This is a symbol of the fact that the truth will definitely win over lies, that good will win over evil, and life will win over death.

Dmitry Plotnikov